1: Herskovits E-4, 5 (1934) 1937 SV3 Haiti SV3
Mirebalais



584 in the same district, the background of the young man is well enough known so that no investigation is necessary, though unfailingly a long and formal discussion of the suitor, his qualities, and his prospects ensues. If his home is some distance away, however, meticulous inquiries are made not only concerning the young man and his immediate family, but of
584 his ancestry as well. Should the suitor live near the home of
212 the young woman, as usually happens, his own parents come with a *lettre de demand*. In earlier days the "letter" was written on flowered paper with a lacy border, but today plain colored paper does very well. When presented, it is wrapped
[603] in a green silk handkerchief, "for hope" — the handkerchief
[822] costs about five gourdes, and a similar amount is given the scribe — and is usually carried by the oldest man of the family; that is to say, the paternal grandfather if living, or if he is dead, the father, accompanied by the mother and per-
[178] haps the other grandparents. Today it is said that in the valley of Mirebalais the custom of presenting these letters of request is often disregarded, but is by no means extinct.[1]

The family of the girl is always apprised of the exact time of the visit, and refreshments are on hand. No reply is given at the time of the delivery of the "letter," since the families of both the father and the mother of the girl must consent to the match before it can be finally approved. However, at the stage of the courtship which the presentation of a "letter" implies, this delayed answer is a matter of form, for if the proposal had not been acceptable, the girl would not have been allowed to see the suitor. The refusal of a "letter" has
[578] been known to occur, but this is regarded as a deadly insult, and deep enmity between the families follows. Should the family of the girl, not wishing to be abrupt, accept the "letter" and proffer refreshments to its bearers, but later return the same "letter" as a sign of rejection, even this would be
584 bitterly resented. Under such circumstances the young man
832 takes steps to obtain revenge by providing himself with a
578

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love-charm designed to insure the young girl's coming to him. He then uses all persuasion to give her a child and, this achieved, abandons her to show his contempt for the family that has formally refused to accept him as a son-in-law.

Usually, however, the visit is returned by the family of the girl, bearing a "response" of acceptance wrapped in a red silk handkerchief, "for victory." And just as the family of the young woman had known in advance of the coming of her suitor's relatives, word of the favorable verdict is now sent through indirect channels, so that the family of the young man may also be prepared to receive the emissaries who come on behalf of the girl.

With this formal acceptance of the young man's suit, the wedding waits until he has accumulated the requisites for a household. Custom dictates that even should he be prepared, the ceremony must be delayed for several months while he remains in a probationary state, to assure the family of his fiancée of his worthiness. The young woman is also under surveillance during this time, when she may be asked to help her future mother-in-law with the housework, and particularly with the washing and ironing of linens. Generally a period of from two to three years elapses before the bridegroom accumulates enough to fulfill his obligations in marriage. During this time the family of the young woman is acquiring the things she is expected to bring to her husband: linens and dishes — though in the poorer peasant families these items would not be provided her — cooking utensils, water-containers, knives, forks, and other things needed for the household. Her father also presents her with a horse, a donkey, six or seven pigs, the same number of goats, as well as chickens, guinea-hens, and turkeys.

Tokens of virginity are not demanded before the match, since Mirebalais custom requires that the girl tell before her marriage whether she has had relations with other men. She may be sent away if it is discovered that she has told an un-

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CHAPTER XII

# *MAGIC, GOOD AND BAD*

In opening any discussion of Haitian magic, the fact must be stressed that magic, though but one of the forces active in the universe, is a system in itself. As such, it is a thing apart from the *vodun* cult, a point which must also be emphasized, for although most writers draw a perfunctory distinction between magic and *vodun*, this distinction, once stated, is too often promptly lost sight of.[1] At the same time, the differences between the worship of the *loa* and the practice of magic must not be so juxtaposed as to name the second as the antibody of the first. For, though some of the *loa* can work harm, and some of them, indeed, are primary forces behind the working of evil rather than beneficial magic, the good and bad they do is general in nature. Magic, on the other hand, whether good or bad, always operates in very specific instances: to cause a given woman to love a given man, or to make a certain field of a certain enemy yield poorly.

Yet these distinctions, when drawn, are found in practice to be neither as sharp nor as consistent as the foregoing statements might imply, especially since the system of magic is empowered and validated by many of the *loa*, as well as being closely affiliated with the cult of the dead. The phenomenon dealt with here, and its not illogical contradictions, arise, however, from the fact that the realistic African world view has by

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it possible for the owner to go to war without being harmed. Even were the possessor of such a *drogue* to be struck by a bullet, the wound would be a minor one; while the thrust of a machete or saber would leave him unscathed, poison placed in drink or food would be impotent, and a trap set against the warrior would be ineffective. Some *drogues*, it is held, allow the owner to disappear when trapped by enemies. For such an important *drogue* a special day, designated by its maker, is set aside for the observance of certain taboos, the most important being the requirement of sexual abstinence on that day.[4] Some men possess as many as seven of these *drogues*, in which case one day every seventh week is reserved for each. Said a man who had taken part in the rebellion of 1918–20 against the Marine occupation: "I have a small, small *drogue*. I had it in the Caco fighting. I have need of a big one." When it was observed that there is no more fighting in Haiti, the reply came promptly: "A man must be prepared. Nobody knows what will come."

The grandfather of this man was said by him to have owned a *drogue* which came from Guinée. He knew how to resuscitate those who had met their death from unnatural — magical — causes; he had only to come to the *barrière* before the house where the body lay, call the name of the victim, and the dead would arise. He was once attacked when he was returning home with a purse filled with money he had won at cards, and his assailants beat him to death and threw him into a well. The next morning, when he was found, he revived in a few moments and asked to be buried beside the well. The following day one of the men who had assaulted him died; the next day another died, and so for five days, until all of them were dead.

Love-charms form an important category of good magic, as also charms to aid in selling in the markets or in keeping a job or to hold the affection of a spouse. Old men are believed to have important magical powers for good, and one such